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ABSTRACT

Theories of taste are efforts to understand the processes of signification by which cultural forms take on meaning, and how subjects are inserted into such processes. One of these theories is the notion of "taste cultures," set forth by Herbert Gans in the 1960s and continued by George Lewis into the 1980s. A taste culture is an aggregate of similar people making similar choices. A struggle is implied, which is resolved in the democratic free market, but class and education are the key determinants of membership in taste cultures. Another theory is the more structural approach of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his view, taste, which is assumed to be based upon free choice, is, in fact, a reflection of social class. While it appears that class-based distinctions of taste are breaking down, domination by upper classes has become more complex and insidious. What is needed is the kind of analysis which would enable conceptions of taste to transcend the boundaries of those previous models which relied exclusively on audience analysis and which theorized solely through metaphors of the market and of structures. (Eleven notes are included; a 32-item bibliography is attached.) (SG)

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The Problem of Taste within the Problematic of Culture

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> Stryper sets about winning us over to its way of thinking with a saccharine hodgepodge of *PTL* sentiment. The melodies aren't half-bad, but born-again Styx just doesn't wash with your average slam fan.
>
> Stayer retaliates with a cacophony of genuinely offensive satanic drivel that will probably win over a couple of thrash fans who've already lost their hearing anyway.
>
> -*Rolling Stone*[1]

Consider the assumptions in the above record review. It demands a certain level of cultural knowledge in terms of its references to television (*PTL*), to the recent history of rock music (Styx), as well as to the bands whose records are being reviewed. Although the review implies that Stryper is a fundamentalist Christian heavy metal band and Slayer is known for the hellish images in its lyrics, it assumes a certain degree of knowledge on the part of *Rolling Stone* readers. But perhaps most importantly, this passage assumes certain cultural groupings in its reference to "the average slam fan" and the "thrash fans who've already lost their hearing," as well as to the notion of a "heavy metal" genre. The implied reader, the follower of music who understands the meanings and cultural positions of certain types of music, certain artists and certain fans, is inscribed within this review.

Does this type of discourse simply recognize already existing cultural groupings ("born-again metal fans" and "satanic thrash fans"), or does it work to constitute them? Why is it considered "natural" for certain types of people (in this case, predominantly white male middle class teenagers) to "choose" to become members of such groupings, and why does it seem so "natural" for such groupings to exist, to be understood, and to be written and joked about on the pages of a magazine? The problem of studying the construction of such choices and groupings, then, becomes a series of questions about the relations between choice and

1

structure, taste and culture. The objects of study that emerge are the extent to which the individual "chooses" to "like" and be identified with particular cultural forms by way of mediated systems of knowledge like *Rolling Stone*, and the extent to which such a choice is structured by social determinants. In this sense, the study of taste must define "choice" and "liking" within the problematic of culture.

Analyses and theories of taste thus work to understand the processes of signification by which cultural forms have meaning and are made to mean, and how subjects and groups of subjects insert themselves and are inserted into such processes. Although *Rolling Stone*'s distinction is within the cultural form of music, such groupings of texts and audiences are made in all popular cultural forms. Through specific genres and through the construction of "stars" or "authors," texts are grouped together; they are made to see in some way related through the repetition of elements and the processes of signification. Similarly, through their like reactions to mechanically reproduced cultural forms, audiences group themselves and are grouped together in both abstract (*Billboard* referring to "country music fans" in an article on current trends in concert attendance) and concrete (a meeting of the Conway Twitty fan club at a concert) ways.

This paper is an attempt to summarize and critique two descriptions and analyses of these processes, and then point in the directions which I think will prove more fruitful in conceptualizing taste and culture. I will begin with the study of "taste cultures," as initiated by Herbert Gans in the mid-1960s and as continued in the present by, among others, George Lewis. Arising from the historical moment of the mass culture debates in the United States, this tradition was begun as an attempt of the mass culture debates in the United States, this tradition was begun as an attempt to rescue the popular from the cultural ghettos to which elite academics had banished it by positing the popular audience as actively engaged in the

process of reception. This audience "freely chooses" to participate in popular culture, finding the forms relevant to their lives and situation. In order to explain why certain types of people---and he explicitly called them classes---tended to like or consume certain types of texts, Gans formulated the notion of "taste cultures."

In my critique of both Gans' work and Lewis' contemporary appropriation of it, I will argue for a more structural approach to these processes, one closer to the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu sees taste, or the tendency to like to consume certain types of commodities, as both structured and structuring. Briefly, taste is structured by the individual's position in social space, a position which is itself further structured by each "choice" the individual makes. This summary reduces Bourdieu's argument to a simple equation, and I will argue in more precise ways that his work stands as an important corrective for any hope of constructing a working conception of taste. Bourdieu's work is not without its own problems, and by enumerating and analyzing these problems I hope to point to directions in which cultural theory can use his model to construct a more enabling one for both theoretical and practical analysis.

Throughout my critique of these two traditions, I will focus on three components necessary to a theory of taste and culture: the role of individual choice, the relations among various groups based on individual tastes, and the relations between individuals, groups and social structures at large. In the final section, I will point to ways in which cultural theory can work to transcend the seemingly untranscendable horizons of taste culture work and Bourdieu's model. I will argue that this can only come about by finding points of intervention into the processes of taste not bound by the traditional sender-message-receiver model of communication, and in the final section I will briefly outline one such form of intervention.

Gans and the Taste Culture Tradition

> Taste publics and cultures are not official bodies or organized groups but aggregates of similar people making similar choices, and aggregates of similar content chosen by the same people who can be identified through sociological research.
>
> -[Gans, 1966, 582]

According to Gans, then, taste cultures are *both* audiences and groups of cultural artifacts determined by what he constructs as his central problematics:[2] choice, the relations among taste cultures, and the relations between these "aggregates" and his vision of a successful pluralistic society. Within these problematics, Gans introduces his key terms and oppositions: "aggregates" by "choice" as opposed to "organized groups"; "similar" groups of "people" rather than unidentifiable masses. Central to his conception of choice is Gans' notion of a democratic society, liberating its individual members by enabling them to both participate in its creation and affect their own destinies, and to, ultimately, *create themselves* through the opportunities of education and the possibilities of social and cultural mobility. It is not surprising, then, that one of his most important metaphors constructs taste as a democratic system: "The overall structure [of taste cultures] is not unlike that of party politics, in that it consists of executives and creators who, like politicians, offer alternatives, and of audiences who, like voters, choose among them" (1966, p. 595). Gans' ideal cultural system emerges as a sort of enlightened free market democracy in which "creators are free to do what they want and to create for the publics they wish to reach, and consumers are free to choose from the available content" (ibid, p. 609).

But it is an ideal that does not ignore---though it does ultimately bracket off---the process of struggle over the construction of that which the individual chooses. Gans writes, "when resources are scarce...or when values are contradictory,...there is likely to be conflict

among cultures" (ibid, p. 595). But this sense of struggle among groups is ultimately diffused in his conceptions of culture as a successfully "democratic" "free" market. There is no conflict in the final instance, ultimately, because the free market dictates that "economic dominance is today located in the lower-middle public since it has the largest purchasing power" (ibid, p. 595). He further argues that this economic dominance is "naturally accompanied" by some degree of political power, which he finds in the "checks and balances" of policy---the FCC as the great democratic equalizer. An extensive critique of these somewhat naive conceptions of "power" seems unnecessary here, and I will leave for others the task of debunking any thought that there is either political or economic dominance in the lower middle classes or fairness in bureaucratic policy meant to regulate the "free" flow of capital in the communications industries. But by questioning his own conception of taste as a series of free, democratic choices---despite an unsuccessful and immediate resolution---Gans has suggested an enabling conception of conflict that will prove important in a theory of taste.

In addition to this sense of choice as being not entirely free from conflict, Gans' conception of the act of choosing or consuming is a decidedly active one. Citing Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) among others, Gans counters the notion of the audience as "bucketheads" purely subject to manipulation by mass culture by arguing that audiences "use the media for diversion and would not think of applying its content to their own lives," and perceive the media selectively through previously constructed value systems (1966, p. 562). In addition, Gans views the audience as a group of individuals who do not merely "consume" popular cultural products. He often substitutes the word "use" or "users" for "consume" or "consumers," and, in arguing against mass culture critics, he writes:

> Their argument assumes that consumption is a passive act, and therefore undesirable, whereas creation alone is active and therefore desirable. This too is an overly Puritanical judgement and neglects the response that reading or watching movies evokes in the consumer, which may be a creative act even if it does not result in a visible product.
>
> -[ibid, 608]

For Gans, then, choosing is an act: an act of free will, though not without conflicts; an active one, one that produces not a product but a creative, individual response; and an act performed separately by the individual, but together with a series of (perhaps unknown) others as an aggregate.

An important contradiction within Gans' theorizing about culture and his theoretical concept of taste cultures lies in his conception of the relations among these aggregates. He argues that these groups are "not entirely separate" (1966, p. 593), but when he describes his "six major taste publics and their cultures" he constructs them as separate entities and "relatively homogeneous and static wholes" (ibid, p. 583).[3] In defining and outlining these groups he artificially cuts them off and out of the processes and struggles of society; thus, he attempts to cut the groups both ways, analyzing them both as separable and static units *and* as dynamic parts of social structures at large.

He begins his discussion of the societal relations among cultures in a thoroughly optimistic tone, confident that in the democratic free market of postwar America "there is mobility of choice, for some people are upwardly mobile culturally as well as socially and economically" (ibid, p. 594). Not only can an individual move within taste cultures, but such cultures can share cultural products which conform to what he terms "aesthetic standards," which include the standards of "beauty," taste, and emotional and intellectual values that are shared by the groups at large (ibid, p. 531). Such products prove successful often through

(and, perhaps, because of) the media that these cultures share, most notably television --- thus, for Gans, public television provides the opportunity for those "less fortunate" to get some culture.

Again, Gans implies a sense of struggle, but it remains below the surface and is ultimately resolved by the democratic free market. He sees this struggle among taste cultures as occurring most obviously within the sacred realm of the elite, who continually attempt to preserve and maintain their dominant position. Gans argues that the boundaries between elite and popular taste cultures become clearest when "defenders" of high culture fight against the "borrowing" of their forms by lower cultures: "Of course, high culture still *feels* debased; but this feeling of debasement can now be seen as a way of maintaining taste culture boundaries between high and upper-middle cultures and public, rather than as a sign of the imminent destruction of high culture" (ibid, p. 598). The discourse of elite culture, focused upon the autonomous "creator" living and working apart from the masses, ultimately seeks to preserve that taste culture's distinction from others. Popular culture, oriented towards the consumer and, according to the elite, pandering to the masses, is marginalized as an unworthy, debased form.

Further, Gans is willing, though in an indirect way, to connect these processes to the workings of society. He writes, "The content of the taste culture does not develop in a vacuum; it must meet the standards of form and substance that grow out of the values of the society and the needs and characteristics of its members" (ibid, p. 580). And just as cultural forms are not totally arbitrary, Gans does note determinants that affect how individuals might "choose" or be placed within particular taste cultures. Importantly, he claims (while warning that this is a possible "oversimplification") that the single most important factor in determining taste culture is class: "Aesthetic standards and leisure choices *reflect* people's backgrounds

and in American society, where ethnic, religious, and regional differences are rapidly disappearing, the major source of subcultural variety is increasingly that of age and class [sic], especially the latter" (ibid, p. 582, my italics).[4] The same critic who condones the positive potentials of what he sees as a democratic free market cultural economy is thus willing to admit that class and education come first and limit the individual's free choice of taste: "The range of taste cultures and publics follows closely the range of classes in American society" (ibid, p. 582).

And finally---and most importantly---Gans has a hidden notion of ideology imbedded within his theory of class determination; a sense of not so much false consciousness as an innocent befuddlement of the masses. This arises from the contradictions of his theory of culture, particularly in his willingness at the end of his essay to admit that high culture is, in the final analysis, better than popular culture. He argues in this concluding section that governmental policy should work to enable all individuals to obtain a high enough educational level that they would naturally "choose" to participate in the higher taste cultures. Thus he is not a relativist---believing that all taste cultures are the same---but a pluralist---believing that one culture is better than the other while arguing the merits of each and moving towards embracing, as a society, the better one.[5]

Why, then, Gans seems to wonder, do individuals "choose" to read comic books, watch television, or listen to pop music? In answering, he makes the observation that, "although poor people would like to have the income and power that is available to the upper income groups, low taste publics do not feel deprived by their [lack of] ability to participate in high culture" (ibid, p. 596). Low or popular taste cultures not only "choose" those tastes that reflect their class, they choose them willingly, without resistance. The struggle over dominant forms of culture, then, is resolved at the class level: the lower classes have what they like and like

what they have. Thus, according to Gans' evaluation, they are wrong but they don't know they are wrong; their tastes and, by implication, the boundaries of these tastes are affected by their positions within various determinations, most notably class. Gans implies, then, that individual taste is to some extent determined, as are relations among taste cultures and between such cultures and society, by a simplistic notion of class (educational and economic) and some simplistic form of ideology.

Current Studies in Taste Cultures

> The central fact is that *we pretty much listen to, and enjoy the same music listened to by other people we like or identify with.*
> -[Lewis, 1987, 200, his italics]

When Gans' term "taste culture" is appropriated and updated within the discipline of sociology in the 1980s, the problematics of choice and relations between such choices and social structure remain central but are changed in important ways. Although to greater and lesser degrees a number of scholars working in different disciplines have been carrying on this tradition in the years since Gans' initial formulation,[6] I will focus in this paper on the work of George H. Lewis, whose work on popular music stands as the most fully articulated current theoretical conception of taste cultures.

As the excerpt above makes clear, Lewis' conception of taste involves an even less limited set of "choices" than those of which Gans conceived. The proof, again, is in the market, in which there exists "a diversity of cultural products from which people can and do selectively choose" (1981, p. 203). Lewis sees this greater range of choice and the strong "subjective determination" of taste arising from a pluralistic consumer society thriving under conditions of "relatively high cultural mobility, greater discretionary income, high diffusion rate of cultural products, conspicuous consumption, and a greater amount of leisure time" (1987, p. 204). Thus, in a sense, the kind of democratization of popular culture through the free market

of the media that Gans envisioned has taken place in Lewis' conception of the individual "pretty much" choosing that which she wishes to listen to or watch and those with whom she wishes to identify herself.

But a number of contradictions within Lewis' work become apparent upon closer inspection, and this notion of free choice is put into doubt. This occurs most obviously in two ways: in his idealist conception of music and in his regard for the discipline within sociology that studies the production of culture. The former contradiction seems most glaring in the lack of an adequate theory of meaning and signification in Lewis' discussion of music in particular and cultural forms in general. Instead of a specific conception, he quite often uses "music" as the subject of sentences as though cultural forms "naturally" have meaning and effects. Thus, music is "an ordered system of meaning and symbols" (1987, p. 199); it "helps to define the important groupings and subcultures of British and other youth cultures" (ibid, p. 202); and it is "charged with subjective meaning" (ibid, p. 204). In addition, "musical artifacts symbolize the group that identifies with them and its style of life" (ibid, p. 205). There is obvious confusion here: does music symbolize, is it made to symbolize, or do both processes occur? Is music an "ordered system" or is it constructed as an ordered system? For example, in a musical genre like heavy metal, are there "natural" connections between loud guitars and thundering drums, long hair, black clothing and drugs, and white, middle class male teenagers, aggression, misogyny and body movements like head banging? Or are these connections articulated over a history of similar signifying practices? Is the process of signification an individual or cultural act? Do individual artists, people and subcultures "choose" the meanings they attach to their music and their tastes? And if neither "music" nor individuals or "taste cultures" have the power to define and symbolize, then how subjective is meaning and how free is choice?

A similar problem arises when Lewis begins to discuss and privilege the findings of studies of the culture industries. He argues, quite rightly, that the processes by which cultural products are produced have imbedded within them a series of limitations and controls that make clear the fiction of any notion of an autonomous production of culture. As he concludes, "The organizational structure of the culture industries in the system have a great deal to do with shaping the linkages between the cultural and social structures" (1981, p. 214). Thus he is willing to admit that "systems of musical production and distribution" *can* "unite or fail to unite subcultures, communities and groups" (1987, p. 209) while he still claims an autonomous construction of meaning and taste. And as he moves beyond Gans in terms of allowing for a greater subjectivity of taste for the individual, Lewis also moves in the other direction by seeing other factors---cultural forms that have their own ordered meanings and that have the power to define, and culture industries that limit and are limited by the "free" market---as necessarily determining the choices from which the individual can choose.

In resolving this contradiction, Lewis posits two levels: on one level is

> a framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments. On the other level, there is the framework of interactive behavior, called social structure, that is composed of social classes, group organization and subcultures.
>
> (1987, p. 199)

The object of his cultural analysis, then, is the relations between these two levels. But this artificial separation of the individual from the social is the central problem in Lewis' conception of choice and its positioning or structuring in the social world. Symptomatic of this problem is his notion of the relation between class and taste. He rightly sees class as neither a singular nor necessary determinant of taste, arguing that more profitable analysis might arise from studies on the variance of cultural choices both within and between social classes (1981, p. 210). He appropriates Peterson and Dimaggio's notion of "culture class" (1975) in order to

redefine taste cultures as aggregates that are "nondefinable in the traditional, social class sense of taste culture" (Lewis, 1987, p. 203).[7] This leads to his noting the rather banal and trivial fact that Princess Caroline, like "many American ghetto blacks," digs Stevie Wonder records (ibid, p. 294). What becomes obvious when Lewis makes this split between the individual and social structure is that he mystifies "liking," or, more specifically, consuming cultural products: for Lewis, as well as for Gans, all consumption, all social uses of a television show or a record, no matter the determinants, are essentially *the same*. Thus the ways in which Princess Caroline and an inner-city black adolescent purchase, listen to, and use music in a social setting are presumed equivalent. Transcendental individuals can enter the record store on equal terms.

This problem becomes a theoretical mess when Lewis makes a quick and unsuccessful attempt to appropriate Max Weber's distinction between class and status (1987, p. 205). Lewis wants to equate his conception of taste culture with Weber's "status group," yet fails to recognize that, for Weber, status is structured through difference and domination. This then raises all of the problems that Lewis has separated on two levels and thus avoided: social structure, domination and power, and the relation of the individual to them. Weber writes, "The development of status is essentially a question of stratification resting upon usurpation" (1946, p. 188). In fact, it is Gans' conception of the struggle between elite and popular taste cultures that is closer to Weber's status group; compare the former's sense of the need for high culture to maintain its position with Weber's argument concerning the economic effects of status stratification: "The hindrance of the free development of the market occurs first for those goods which status groups directly [withhold] from free exchange by monopolization. This monopolization may be effected either legally or conventionally" (ibid, p. 192-3). Lewis' conception of the individual and group free from such determinations and systems of

domination makes the equation between his updated notion of taste cultures with Weber's more complex status group seem unworthy at best.

Thus as he makes the important and necessary movement away from Gans' rather simplistic sense of class towards a more sophisticated model, Lewis' work leads towards a model of taste in which determinations such as economic class and education exist outside the individual. This individual can somehow "see" the social structure and "pretty much choose" what and whom she wants to like and be like. The absence within his model of any identifiable notion of the relationships among taste cultures and between these cultures and society makes clear his simplistic conception of the subject, her tastes, and these tastes' relations within the social space that work to structure them.

Structured and Structuring: Bourdieu's Notion of Taste

> Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make.
>
> -[Bourdieu, 1984, 6]

Although the work of Pierre Bourdieu stands in sharp contrast to the history of American conceptions of "taste cultures," Bourdieu and representative theorists such as Gans and Lewis share some important assumptions. They all, to varying degree, see taste as in some way patterned: in the case of Gans, groups share certain cultural forms; for Lewis, individuals choose particular cultural forms that ally them with certain relatively unstructured culture classes; and for Bourdieu, "taste" is theorized within questions of larger social structures which are themselves tightly patterned. Bourdieu would undoubtedly agree with Gans and Lewis that individuals think that their tastes are "free choices," but moves to deeper levels of both abstraction and concrete social practices to study the determinations of such patterning. In order to reconstruct a conception of taste for current cultural theory, then, it will be necessary to take into account and adapt Bourdieu's refusal to separate "culture" or "taste"

from the processes of social class, power and domination. Due to limitations of space and scope, I am forced to make some necessary simplifications of Bourdieu's work, and I will focus almost exclusively on his concept of the individual subject's structured and structuring "taste," the various relations among the conflicting tastes of subjects and classes in social space, and the structures by which such relations and space are determined.[8] I will conclude this section by proving some of the limitations and problems of Bourdieu's work, in particular his rather simplistic and nearly idealized notion of cultural forms and his equally simplistic concept of the "social use" of these forms.

Bourdieu would agree, given certain reservations and subversions, with the ways in which Lewis and Gans equate choice with consumption and their view of this "choice" as an active process. Bourdieu argues that consumption is a "stage in the process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code" (1984, p. 2). Consumption is thus both a distinctive sign and a sign of distinction which "produces separations intended to be perceived or, more precisely, known and recognized as legitimate differences, which often means differences in nature ('natural distinction')" (1985, p. 730). Thus consumption "always presupposes a labor of appropriation.... The consumer helps to produce the product he consumes, by a labor of identification and decoding" (1984, p. 100). It would *seem*, then, that Bourdieu argues that the individual can, by understanding both the cultural and social codes that constitute the form's meanings, "pretty much choose" to consume those forms which reflect the distinctions that she wishes to make for herself and opposed to others.

But Bourdieu disagrees sharply with this conception, arguing that it ignores the social and historical structuring of both the chosen forms and the subject's choices. If cultural forms are "historical objects" and are subject to variations in meaning over time, they are also

produced, consumed and made to mean in material social practice (1985, p. 728). Moving from forms to subjects, there are neither simplistic determinations of taste, nor is there subjective choice; instead, "all the products of a given agent, by an essential *overdetermination*, speak inseparably and simultaneously of his class---or, more precisely, his position in the social structure and his rising or falling trajectory---or, more precisely, his position in the social structure and his rising or falling trajectory---and of his (or her) body---or, more precisely, all the properties, always socially qualified, of which he or she is the bearer" (1977, p. 87). Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to describe that which historically constitutes and is constituted by the subject's (or group's[9]) taste, defining this as

> systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules,...collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.
> [1977, 72]

Bourdieu would thus agree with Lewis and Gans that choice does not *appear* to be regulated; the "democratic" "free" market does not dictate to the individual what should be chosen. Instead, the *habitus*, structured and structuring, historically structured by "objective probabilities" (that is, the chances of access to particular products) and "subjective aspirations" (that which "motivates" a subject to consume a particular form or to see it as a "need") (1977, p. 77), enables this arbitrary set of choices and sense of "taste" to seem in some way "free" and "natural."

It is through this conception of taste that Bourdieu, moving well beyond Gans' latent notion of ideology as that which makes the masses accept low-brow culture, is able to conceive of the relations among various classes---the "tacit acceptance of one's place" and a sense of expected and respected distances of limits (1985, p. 728)---and between classes and

systems of power and domination. In terms of class determination, Bourdieu would again agree with Lewis that it would *appear*, on the surface, as though simple determinations of taste by class are simply no longer present. But whereas Lewis and Gans see the increasing weakening of such distinctions in terms of the plurality of choices and the potential for the individual to choose freely, Bourdieu points to more complex, more insidious forms of domination that are "euphemized" in the space of culture and taste.

This domination occurs on two levels: first, in the subject's position in social space, which is homologous to her ability to oppose or subvert symbolic order; and second, in the homology between the ideological field of production and the social structures of power, through which ideological structures are euphemized and, ultimately, displaced. Bourdieu argues that, "Those who occupy the dominated positions within the social space are also located in dominated positions in the field of symbolic production, and it is not clear where they could obtain the instruments of symbolic production that are needed in order to express their specific viewpoint on social space" (1985, pp. 735-736). Because the dominated classes are unable to produce their own symbolic systems, they must rely on the hierarchies and distribution of capital---whether this capital be economic or cultural---as structured by the dominating classes and structures. Thus, Bourdieu argues, the kinds of cultural "mobility" that Lewis and Gans view as the signs of the triumph of a "free" "democratic" market are merely the social and cultural structures reproducing themselves, with those who subjects increase their accumulations of economic and/or cultural capital doing so within the dominant symbolic structures. Bourdieu cites as an example of this the French educational system, in which "the controlled mobility of a limited category of individuals, carefully selected and modified by individual ascent...is even capable of contributing to social stability in the only way conceivable

in societies based upon democratic ideals and thereby may help to perpetuate the structure of class relations" (1973, p. 71).

In this homologous relationship between the dominated social space and a dominated position within the field of symbolic production, the realm of cultural forms and taste represents a "euphemized" form of the ideological struggle between and among classes (1979, p. 82). The symbolic violence by which domination maintains itself "must be disguised and transfigured" lest this violence reveals itself as such (1977, p. 191): "Symbolic systems owe their specific force to the fact that the power relations expressed in them only ever manifest themselves in the misrecognizable form of sense relations (displacement)" (1979, p. 82). For Bourdieu, the relations between and among various individuals' and groups' tastes *both structure and are structured by* their relations to structures of power and dominance. This circularity conceives of "choice" as that which is always already probable and that which itself works to structure future probabilities and aspirations.

Before attempting to use Bourdieu's work to construct a more adequate conception of taste and culture, it is important to first recognize and understand its limitations and problems. When Lewis raises Bourdieu's *Distinction* in regards to its relevance for the study of American taste cultures, he rather quickly dismisses it as "impressive" research of a "less socially mobile class-based society" (1987, p. 295). Lewis is both correct and wrong here, and for the same reason: Bourdieu's model is too simple, too non-contradictory for a postmodern American culture, but the problem may lie not in France, but in Bourdieu. As John Frow argues, there is an essentialism that haunts Bourdieu's work, an essentialism in a model of class which lacks the "possibility of contradiction within a class and within a class fraction" (1987, p. 71), and a functional essentialism in a conception of cultural forms as working solely as signs of

distinction and as otherwise exhausted within the realm of cultural practice (ibid, p. 66). Even Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams, in an article that argues for Bourdieu's relevance and importance for cultural theory, finds a "functionalist/determinist residue in [his] concept of reproduction" (1980, p. 222). In order to adapt Bourdieu's model to the present studies of first world cultural taste during a period in which "distance from necessity" continues to grow, we must see the points in which such functionalism and essentialism arise in his work and attempt to find ways to avert them.

For Bourdieu, cultural forms seem to be given entities, holistic things that raise no questions and are completely defined by social use. This problem, one that arises from a lack in his work of a systematic account of aesthetic and communicative codes, is clearest in two examples. First, as Frow argues, Bourdieu seems to view the difference between high and popular cultural texts in a simplistic form/content dichotomy, with the former privileged by the dominant aesthetic and the latter by the dominated. Such critically simple divisions fail to see the difficulties in making such a distinction: how and when is content not form, and vice-versa? This uneasy split, coupled with Bourdieu's ironic and often muddy prose, leads one to believe that he is privileging the popular aesthetic as an "authentic," unmediated one, while the dominant aesthetic is for him one of "romantic obfuscation" (Frow, 1987, p. 64). Without any sense, beyond description and functional analyses, of the codes by which such aesthetics are formed, the actual analysis of cultural texts becomes impossible beyond a simplistic "this privileges form and is thus elite" and "this privileges content and is thus popular" level.

This problem is most obvious in Bourdieu's analysis of music. He is able to show, through his research, how nicely musical tastes reflect the hierarchy of educational classes, but when it comes to conceptualizing musical texts or codes, Bourdieu claims that "music is the 'pure art' *par excellence*. It says nothing and has *nothing to say*" (1984, p. 19). He goes

on to discuss various discursive variables by which "socially pertinent properties" are attached to musical forms, such as particular composers, instruments and "social images" (in which he includes such oppositions as baroque/modern and harmony/dissonance, among others). Yet he seems unwilling to see how these various "properties" either are connected to or, in some cases, have actual referents within the music. For example, "harmony" refers to certain attributes of tone, timber and sound that *can and must be analyzed*; and under the discursive category of the composer are a series of musical and discursive expectations and conventions of the composer's work. These categories---composers, genres, musical instruments and any other category by which meanings are limited---are not merely given but are historically constructed in social use, and it is through these constructions that patterns of cultural and social domination and relations of power are reproduced.

In fact, his entire notion of "social use" is not satisfactorily problematized. As Lawrence Grossberg argues, Bourdieu seems to rely on a simplistic encoding/decoding model, separating "production" and "consumption," which can be "easily reduced to a transmission model of subjects existing outside of the particular context of the textual encounter, as if the audience already and always existed" (Grossberg, 1985, p. 101). Thus the classified masses become stable, coherent subjects, whose reaction to cultural forms---to consume or not consume---is reduced to its barest market relation.

In a sense, Bourdieu's model emerges as quite disenabling in terms of more concrete, less abstract theoretical cultural analysis. If one were to unproblematically accept his model, the answers to older questions of culture---such as how does this text work, and how and why does this audience react in such a way?---are already given, and new questions are short-circuited by his model's closed circularity. Even supporters like Garnham and Williams seem a bit frightened by the extreme pessimism one feels both as cultural critic and as political activist

when confronting this model. As Michel de Certeau writes, "Scrupulously examining practices and their logic,...[Bourdieu's] texts finally reduce them to a mystical reality, the *habitus*, which is to bring them under the law of reproduction." Bourdieu's theory, for de Certeau, works as "violently imposed truths" brutally bracketing off any and all subversive "tactics" in favor of "a dogmatic reason" (1984, p. 59). The purpose of the final section of this paper, then, will be to take a critical step back from the work of Bourdieu and taste culture theorists and briefly sketch some possibilities for the future study of taste and culture.

Towards an Account of Taste

The problematics of taste that Gans *et al* and Bourdieu construct can best be perceived along two axes. First, there is the origination of taste and its intersection with cultural values---that is, the points at which people conceptualize their cultural choices within the field of possibilities---which can be analytically defined as by the individual, in groups, within the social realm at large, or some combination thereof. For taste culture theorists, taste originates in the individual "pretty much choosing" what she wants, as well as within the seemingly collective behavior of taste culture groups. Thus, they generally ignore the possibilities of a third level of origination, social determinants. Bourdieu, on the other hand, posits taste as originating in the individual choosing forms that are circumscribed in social space. As opposed to the taste culture theorists, he does not conceive of cultural groups based on taste, except for abstract, theoretically defined cultural classes. The possibilities provided by these models along this axis, then, are a combination of individual and group taste, and a combination of individual taste and social valuation.

The second axis describes the objectification of taste---that is, the way cultural choices are enacted and their results. For Gans *et al*, taste is equated with economic consumptions; like market researchers, their work stops at the point of purchase. Bourdieu goes beyond this

and instead equates consumption and taste as the objectification of a spatial social position, a communicative sign of "distinction." The possibilities along this axis that these two models provide, are *economic consumption* and *communicative* or *cultural consumption*.

On these axes, the limitations of both of these conceptions of taste are clear. In terms of the origination of taste, neither approaches the full range of determinants on the three possible levels of origination, the individual, the group and the social. By over-emphasizing the role of the former two, work on taste cultures inadequately conceptualizes the role of the social both in terms of what is made available for the individual and group by forces of production, and in terms of the ways in which these resources signify and are made to signify on the social level. Bourdieu, on the other hand, by ignoring the communication of taste and consumption on the group level, presents an unsatisfactory vision of an almost fully atomized society. In Bourdieu's model there is no mediation between, on the one hand, the individual "subject," and on the other, the symbolic order, which is always constructed elsewhere and which the "subject" has no power to subvert either individually or collectively.

In terms of second axis, charting the objectification or enactment of taste, both Gans *et al* and Bourdieu present a set of equally disenabling theoretical horizons of taste and consumption. Two central problems of these models are their equating taste with purchase or ownership, and their limitations in explaining the process of reception. First, there is no necessary correspondence between what one buys and displays with what one likes; for example, the availability of music through radio and television broadcasts enables musical tastes to not be defined solely in collections of recordings---a jazz fan might actively "like" Madonna, yet confine that "liking" to what is played on the radio rather than through the consumption or the public display of his or her taste. Secondly, neither Bourdieu nor taste culture work is able to deal with the discursive production of taste---that is, the production of

pleasure, the emotions connected to taste at the individual level, the alliances of shared taste at the group level, and the ways in which this taste affects the relations of individuals and groups among themselves and with social structures at large. By conceiving of taste as exhausted in consumption and communication respectively, taste culture work and Bourdieu severely limit the possibilities of understanding culture, short-circuiting at the point of an economic transaction and a display of accumulations any sense of pleasure and emotion.

This is not to argue that non-consumptive practices and pleasure enable the individual to transcend the cultural or even the economic. The pleasures of and emotional ties to one's taste are inextricably bound to further purchases and implication in the marketplace. For instance, as Simon Frith has argued, popular music no longer sells only recordings; because of the increasing integration of the leisure industries, music is pre-sold to films and advertising, and the whole notion of separate cultural forms is merely aesthetic and ignores the economic and social blurring between "film," "television," "popular music," etc. (Frith, 1988a). In this sense, "buying a record" is not only just one of the possibilities for the consumer, it is also just one of the possible ways the recording can be sold for the record company. Although a fan may on one level subvert the economics of the culture industries through home taping or refusing to purchase a commodity, that in itself does not preclude her insertion into the economic system by which other cultural forms, from soft drinks and automobiles to films, are bought and sold.

Similarly, pleasure and taste must be seen as both tied to available mass-produced resources and to larger questions of social experiences and conditions. For example, the assumptions of the *Rolling Stone* review discussed in the beginning of the essay are important instances of the kinds of discursive formations---"thrash fans," "satanic drivel," "*PTL* sentiment"---through which individuals define their tastes and groups or subcultures form.

Similarly, such formations serve as positions against which other social groups, in this case the PMRC and similar political action groups, can react. They are also the formations within which artists and record labels produce new material and new types or versions of such formations. As Frith writes,

> What is possible for us as consumers---what is available to us, what we can do with it---is a result of decisions made in production, made by musicians, entrepreneurs and corporate bureaucrats, made according to governments' and lawyers' rulings, in response to technological opportunities. The key to "creative consumption" remains an understanding of those decisions, the constraints under which they are made, and the ideologies that account for them (1988b, pp. 6-7).

Frith's recent work can thus serve as a corrective to conceptions of taste and consumption which over-privilege the individual or group (Gans *et al*) or over-emphasize the individual and the social without looking at either cultural forms or their production (Bourdieu). However, the study of production cannot eclipse an adequate theory of the audience in conceptualizing taste. In this respect, given the available material discursive resources, consumption and taste are always in the first instance individual.

In addition to connecting taste to the availability of resources, the study of taste must also connect individual and group taste to social experiences and conditions. In this respect, Bourdieu's model is far more productive than that of taste cultures. For example, current followers of Gans, such as Lewis and James Lull, appropriate British subcultural theory[10] in a way that romantically posits the American punk scene and its music as "oppositional" and symbolizing "an unconscious willingness on the part of everyone to draw 'class' distinctions between interactants in this unique form of communication" (Lull, 1987a, pp. 165-68). If one were to view subcultures as the ultimate example of taste cultures constructing meaning in an almost communal way around cultural forms---which Lull and Lewis imply[11]---then these groups would stand as proof that mass culture provides its audiences the means by which they can

become free individuals working together in a cultural project of reception and creation, oblivious of and impervious from other social determinants. But as Gary Clarke has argued, British subculture theory and those like Lewis and Lull who attempt to appropriate it separate "youth subculture," with its particular styles and artifacts, from the "whole way of life" of culture in the larger sense (1982, p. 18). Angela McRobbie has also critiqued subculture work for its elision of these groups' sexism, as well as the sexist limitations of the theorists' approach; as she writes, "Few writers [on subcultures] seemed interested in what happened when a mod came home after a weekend on speed. Only what happened out there on the streets mattered" (1980, p. 39). Subcultures, and all so-called taste cultures or groups, do not form and exist outside of the determinations of the social realm; they work within and reproduce the conditions in which individuals experience and such groups form. The "audience" and its tastes, then, cannot be conceived of as a simplistic *thing* out there, functioning solely within "consumption" and "reception"; this would only reproduce traditional methodologies of audience research which, as Martin Allor argues, "have tended to reproduce alternative abstractions that pivot around single planes of contradiction, such as gender, class or subjectivity in general, rather than multiple determinations" (1988, p. 219).

Taste, then, is defined individually, through groups, and within social determinants; and practiced economically and culturally within discursive formations in the production of pleasure. What this conception of taste demands, then, is the abandonment of the traditional sender-message-receiver model both in theory and in practice. To separate either the sender or the receiver, to see them as alienated moments in a process of communication, is to do violence to the process of taste. Similarly, the study of "messages" or "texts" as cultural artifacts that "say" something about the culture that produced them and the individuals and "taste cultures" who participated in their reception is to inadequately conceive of the roles of "senders" and

"receivers." To continue to study taste in this manner would be to continue to come up with vastly different ways of looking at the same process: those who privilege the "receiver," such as taste culture theorists, will continue to find the individual and/or group freely choosing and constructing themselves; those who privilege the "sender" in unsophisticated models of the culture industries will continue to view the process as one in which consumers are oppressed in the marketplace; those who privilege the "text" or "message" will continue to come up with whatever they read into it; and those like Bourdieu who privilege the reproduction of cultural and economic hierarchies of receivers will continue to perceive an essentialized and closed process of taste.

One way of moving beyond the limiting boundaries of this traditional model of communication is suggested in Dick Hebdige's "cartography" of taste (1981), as well as in recent work by Michael Denning (1987) and Manual Pena (1985). Hebdige traces the ways in which certain "statements" or discursive formations circulated over the historic period that marked the emergence of British "popular culture" in the middle of this century. "Modernization," "Americanization," and "streamlining" served as important discursive formations or themes in the discourses of design, advertising, novels, intellectual social critics, American films and music, as well as in patterns of consumption---that is, in both sender and receiver, as well as inscribed in "messages." The formations of "modernization" and "Americanization" were articulated and re-articulated differently over time and over media, from the moralistic tones of popular magazines like *The Picture Post* in the late-forties and early-fifties, through anti-jazz and rock policies of the BBC throughout the fifties, then changing in advertisements and media representations of teenage consumerism and hedonism in the late-fifties and early-sixties. In a similar fashion, Denning reconstructs and traces the working class "mechanic accents" of the late 19th Century within the circulating allegorical narrative

themes of "virtue," "class" and "work" of dime novels. Pena traces the euphemized class conflict of Mexican-Americans in Texas in the discursive constructions of "ethnic-folk authenticity" and "assimilated sophistication" in their music and its audience, as signified in particular musical arrangements, tempos and performances.

What this research suggests is that within texts and between producers and audiences there are a number of discursive formations that enable these texts to have meaning, to be attractive or to be preferred, to become a part of an individual, group or social *taste* within a particular historical moment. Rather than argue that these formations simply "reflect" given dominant ideologies, or that consumers freely choose some formations over others and ultimately construct "their own," or that "subjects" use particular formations simply to further situate themselves in social space, one can use them as analytical tools to investigate the axes of taste. These discursive formations work on individual, group and social levels, helping to constitute economic and communicative consumption as well as the range of possibilities in the realm of production. In addition, these formations condition the ways in which particular cultural forms matter and help to bring about the experience of pleasure and emotion that is an integral part of what the individual defines as her "taste." Returning again to the example given at the beginning of the paper, the kinds of assumptions that the review makes tap into various discourses of youth, aggression and authority, thereby defining producers, texts and audiences and locating them within known and recognized maps of taste. This kind of analysis, what Hebdige calls "cartographies of taste" and what I would call the tracing of discursive formations, would enable conceptions of taste to transcend the boundaries of previous models such as those of taste culture and of Bourdieu, which relied exclusively upon audience analysis and which theorized solely through metaphors of the market and of structures.

Notes

1. Kim Neely, untitled review of Stryper's *In God We Trust* and Slayer's *South of Heaven. Rolling Stone*, 10/6/88, p. 140.

2. In a later revision of his work on taste culture, Gans changes his definition slightly to "aggregates of similar values and usually but not always similar content" (1974, 69).

3. In his later revision, Gans stresses that these cultures are "analytic rather than real aggregates. As a result, the description also overemphasizes the boundaries between cultures and publics." Thus, many cultural forms are shared by more than one public, and many individuals, who "choose" from more than one culture, can be classified as "being in one or more cultures" (1974, 71-71).

4. Importantly, he retains this notion of class as final determinant in his revision (1974, 70).

5. He softens this argument a bit in his revision, but retains the somewhat strange distinction that, if one were to compare the elite and popular "without taking into account their taste publics," high culture would seem better. In addition, his call for changes in social policy shifts to a stronger focus on "subcultural programming" rather than an educational push that would move all audiences into the high taste culture (1974, 121-159).

6. See the work of Denisoff (1982, and, with Levine, the empirical research in 1972); Fox and Wince (1975); Lull (1985 and 1987a & b); Roe (1985); and Peterson and Dimaggio (1975). Gans' slight revision (1974) can also be seen as a similar attempt to redefine the concept.

7. In that article, Peterson and Dimaggio do hint at the relations among culture classes, in a sentence that Lewis himself inserts in his article (1987, 203): "Not only are country fans more clearly distinguished by race and age than by social class,...more importantly, many people of the same strata, race and age do *not* like country music" (Peterson and Dimaggio, 1975, 503).

8. For a more complete summary of Bourdieu's work from the perspective of cultural theory, see Garnham and Williams (1980).

9. Group in this respect could refer to any sort of grouping in social space: class (economic or cultural), ethnic background, age, etc.

10. This work is most directly associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the mid-seventies. The central texts of this theory are Hebdige (1979) and Hall et al (1976).

11. See in particular Lull, 1987a and Lewis, 1987 (p. 202), and Lewis, 1985. In the latter work, Lewis sees a particular form of music and the political significance attached to it helping to work towards social change, defined in this case as governmental legislation. Though not specifically subcultural, the analysis still posits a symbolic form and reception of it as relatively unaffect by social determinants and as singularly determining opposition.

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